

INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION
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USE OF WRITTEN PROCEDURES AS MANAGEMENT TOOLS

What kind of administrative procedures generally are put in writing and when and how are such management tools used?

One of the most important duties of the city manager or the mayor (in non-council-manager cities) is to provide over-all direction and coordination of the several departments and of their organizational relationships. Programming, laying out the sequence of steps, outlining the work in terms of who is to do it and when--these steps are part of the manager's job of administrative planning. Many of the procedures must be put in writing to standardize them and to guide and facilitate management. Such "directives", backed by the authority of the manager, also are useful for the guidance and training of employees, and they serve as a source of reference for everyone in the organization.

It is hard to generalize about the extent to which written communications should be used. The larger the organization the more desirable it seems to reduce procedures and policies to writing. Written procedures are particularly useful in a new organization, or in a large organization where many people are doing work which is both routine and similar, or when procedures in an old organization are radically changed. But managers in both large and small cities put many procedures, orders, and instructions in writing.

There is no generally accepted standard terminology in the field of written procedures. For the purpose of this discussion, however, one group of written communications used in internal administration may be said to consist of the administrative code, manuals, and rules and regulations. Another group may be classified as administrative orders or memos. These written procedures are described briefly in this report with special emphasis on the second group.

Codes, Manuals, and Regulations

These types of written communications may be considered together because they generally relate to more than one department or govern contacts between different departments. With the exception of the administrative code and perhaps the personnel rules and regulations these procedures are issued by the administrator without council approval.

The Administrative Code. This code spans the gap between the point where the city charter leaves off and the point where matters can be left to administrative determination. The code should not cover matters subject to change or frequent adjustment; to do so would tend to freeze organization and procedures. Most codes outline the major structure of the organization, functions of the departments, duties and responsibilities of chief officials, and establish the essentials of such procedures as those relating to purchasing, contracting, making public improvements, etc. (Administrative codes are discussed in more detail in MIS Report No. 52, May 1948.)

(Over)

Administrative Manuals. Such manuals generally are guides for administrative action and contain more detail than is found in the administrative code. Since emphasis is placed on the "how" of various tasks, manuals are useful in training new employees and in setting forth standard practice. Manuals covering procedures in more than one department are prepared under the direction of the manager. Among the matters commonly covered are personnel, purchasing, and budget procedures. Manuals relating to only one department are prepared by the department head and issued under his authority. Examples of such manuals are the duty manuals of police departments or the regulations of fire departments.

Administrative Regulations. These are issued by the chief administrator and relate to general administrative policy and procedure and are prepared for the continuing guidance of department heads and employees. They apply to more than one department and are less detailed than manuals. Regulations are issued without approval of the council and can be amended or rescinded at any time. Enforcement of general and departmental regulations is the task of the manager and department heads. Regulations may cover such matters as the use of motor vehicles on city business, requests for transfer of funds, methods of reporting accidents involving city employees and property, payroll procedures, method of handling citizen complaints, inter-departmental authorization for service and supplies, use of city buildings and property--all of which are designed to establish uniform practices. They require little time and expense to prepare and in a small city when centrally filed serve as a substitute for administrative codes and manuals.

The sequence of steps to be taken in the construction of a pavement, for example, must be developed and put on paper for use by the city engineer or other department head as a check list of things to be done and the order in which they are to be done before a new pavement is constructed. The preparation of such a check list and much of the administrative planning may be prepared initially by a department head. But if any aspect concerns other departments it is reviewed and perhaps revised by the manager with the aid of such other department heads and issued as an administrative regulation.

Some chief administrators may want to distinguish between administrative regulations and standard practice instructions, both of which would apply to the several departments. The latter, however, would not be serially numbered, would deal with a specific job, and would not be continuously in effect because they may be changed from year to year. A typical example are the instructions from chief administrator to department heads regarding the method of preparing work programs and submitting annual budget estimates. (See MIS Report No. 53, June, 1948, p.212.)

Method of Preparation. Specific suggestions on preparing and issuing manuals and regulations would include:

1. Administrative regulations probably should be reviewed by the city attorney for form and legality before final approval.
2. The chief administrator should set up a procedure for review and approval of departmental regulations to assure that they set forth sound practice and do not conflict with general administrative policy.
3. Administrative manuals and regulations might well be the product of conferences between the administrator and department heads who will be affected. In some instances, as in the case of personnel regulations, employees should have an opportunity to review and comment on them before final adoption. This will

result in more practical documents and in better acceptance of the result (see MIS Report No. 41 "Personnel Rules and Regulations" August, 1947).

4. Simplicity and clarity of language are of primary importance. A stilted, verbose, and pseudo-legalistic form of writing should be avoided if written manuals and other communications are not to miss the mark. A good rule to follow is to choose the simpler of two words, phrases, or sentences which have the same meaning and then check the result carefully for completeness. The end result should be the expression most apt to get the meaning across.

5. In preparing manuals and regulations the material should be arranged in a logical and systematic plan under which related subjects are brought together. Descriptive sub-headings make it easier to locate desired material. The use of a separate paragraph for each idea contributes to ease of reading.

6. Administrative manuals and regulations are incidental to the administration of municipal activities and rarely require enactment by the council except in cases where relations with the council make it expedient to do so. For example, if personnel regulations are to apply to all employees, including those of independent boards, approval by the council might be desirable.

7. Each written communication should specify by title and date any previous documents which it amends and restate them fully as amended, instead of giving only the amended sections. In some cases the new provisions can be indicated by under-lining. Provision should be made for periodic review and codification of all regulations.

8. Certain regulations should be published. Every official and employee, for example, should have a copy of the personnel rules and regulations, unless a more readable personnel manual is issued. It is next to impossible to operate a personnel program without a written set of rules and regulations. New as well as old employees are interested in knowing what working conditions apply uniformly to all employees. When details of the procedure are left to conjecture the result is apt to be a series of conflicting decisions and inconsistent practices reflected in numerous questions from employees, department heads, etc. The same comment of course applies to other procedures.

9. The chief administrator should provide for a regular method of numbering, indexing, and filing the several types of instructions. Careful consideration should be given to the structure of the manuals so as to facilitate reference, filing, and replacement of revised text. Every rule or regulation should indicate the effective date. An easily distinguishable way is to have each type issued on different colored paper stock. Each should be numbered serially and dated. A complete file of administrative regulations should be kept in the offices of the city manager, city clerk, and city attorney.

Administrative Orders and Memos

Most of the discussion here is concerned with orders and memos issued by the administrator as a day-to-day tool to give direction and to secure coordination. What methods are generally used and when and how should orders be issued?

Methods Used. Written communications of this type usually are thought of as relating to and addressed to a particular individual. The administrator, for example, sends a memo to a department head asking him (1) to investigate and report on a specific problem, or (2) to handle a specific matter growing out of a council action, or (3) to perform a specific job indicating work to be done

(Over)

and when it is to be completed.

The preparation of orders and memos relating to specific work requires knowledge of the personnel required to do the job, how long it will take to do the job, how the physical operations must be timed so that materials and men will be available when and where needed, whether it has been included in the annual work program, and whether the necessary funds are available. Administrative orders put wheels under the administrative machine and full benefit of good organization and sound programming will be realized only if orders are issued with the proper spirit and artistry. The art of issuing orders consists largely in knowing when not to issue them. The more effective the organization scheme and the planning procedures, the fewer will be the number of specific orders required.

Managers usually give department heads very wide latitude in the execution of work for which they are responsible. But obviously some department heads need more direction than others. Most managers are in contact with most of their department heads each day and in most instances the manager's instructions or orders are oral and are given in such a way that they can be adopted by the department head concerned as his own without losing his feeling of responsibility. Many managers, however, issue instructions through the medium of work orders or memos. In the larger cities practically all inter-departmental communications of any consequence are put into writing. Even telephone or personal conferences are followed by written instructions or confirmations.

For special assignments some cities use a system of serially numbered work orders issued in duplicate with the original sent to the department head and the carbon copy retained in the manager's office. When the original work order is returned with a notation of work done the carbon is destroyed and the original filed. On the more important projects the manager may work out a complete schedule of operations in graphic form for the guidance of the department head who supervises the work. Through frequent conferences the manager keeps a check on the progress of the work.

Another method frequently used is for the manager to discuss with the department heads concerned the nature of the project to be undertaken, priority, and procedure for handling the work. After such a conference the department head may submit to the manager a written memo covering the points discussed. If the manager approves, he okays it, returns the carbon copy to the department head and keeps the original. If the manager does not approve it, he has a further conference with the department head. If more than one department is involved, the procedure to be followed is outlined in a memo to the operating department chiefly concerned with carbon copies going to other departments. This plan of discussing the matter in advance with the department head concerned helps to fix in his mind the objectives which should be accomplished and that the procedure to be followed is reasonable and proper. Where more than one department is concerned the manager acts as the coordinating agent.

Most managers issue instructions after each council meeting but the sequence of accomplishment is left to the department head unless for some reason unknown to him the work more recently authorized is more important in which case the memo indicates priorities. It is desirable to set up a simple but formal system for insuring that matters referred to the manager by the council are promptly handled by department heads. An excellent practice used in many cities is for the city clerk to refer to the manager separate matters which require action or further report by the manager.

In some cities galley proofs of council minutes are cut up and pasted on printed forms, the clerk keeping one copy and two copies going to the manager.

The bottom of the form is used by the manager for any suggestions he has to pass on to the department head as to the manner and time the work is to be done. The original copy is then sent to the department head, the secretary to the manager keeping one copy for follow-up. Any communication the manager later submits to the council is reviewed first by all department heads affected.

When and How Orders are Issued. The wise administrator should deliberately study the techniques through which he exercises administrative leadership. The administrator's task is mainly one of stimulating, educating, and developing his subordinates rather than commanding them. His command function should be exercised so far as possible through long-term planning and budgeting and through in-service training rather than through a continuous flow of on-the-spot orders.

The very foundation of delegation is the ability to describe what must be accomplished. The discretion of department heads might be unfortunately limited by too close instructions concerning method. Thus the general method may be left to the department head's discretion if the required accomplishments are outlined. Department heads should know as the result of training and conferences with the chief administrator what is expected of them, how to do the job, and what the standards of performance are so as to avoid the need of much order giving.

Another point to be kept constantly in mind is that the administrator must not lean too heavily on his authority to put his orders across--he must not too frequently "pull rank" on his subordinates. An order should be obeyed not because of the authority of the order-giver, but because the order is recognized as correct by the person to whom it is issued. Every administrative problem has a "best" solution, the merits of which will be recognized by almost everyone concerned once it has been discovered and analyzed. The task of the administrator, under this conception, is to help his subordinates discover the "best" solution, to reach an agreement with them on it, and to translate it into an order.

The administrator should realize that subordinate status creates in most men a certain amount of resentment--often in direct proportion to the subordinate's intelligence and initiative. This resentment is minimized when the superior and his subordinates focus their attention on carrying out a joint task--on finding the right solution--instead of concerning themselves with questions of authority and status. This has an equally favorable effect on the superior, for under these circumstances he is not likely to issue a hasty or ill-advised order merely to "show who's boss".

In so far as the chief administrator can educate his staff to this "best single solution" idea he will find that he has lightened not only his task of direction, but that of coordination as well. For when employees are concentrating on getting a job done they are in a frame of mind to coordinate their activities spontaneously without indulging in jurisdictional disputes to assert authority and maintain prestige. Orders therefore should indicate what should be done in case of exceptions or emergencies which are likely to arise.

There is no one best practice of contacting department heads because much depends upon such factors as the number of department heads and their characteristics and temperament and also on the personality of the chief administrator and the size of the organization. The manager should not do routine work that others can do nor should he generally supervise such work personally. The department heads may do the preliminary thinking and planning on important departmental matters and problems referred to them by the manager and when the proper handling of a routine matter has been determined by an assistant or by a department head and approved by the manager the procedure is standardized and may be put into the form of a regulation, instruction, work order or memo, whichever is most suitable.

(Over)

Some managers use formal communications only on important matters which involve some change in procedure or policy. They prefer to issue most instructions through the medium of work orders or by telephone or personal contact with the department head. An attempt to handle routine matters by means of written communications would slow up the procedure considerably. Moreover, when it is necessary to reduce the simplest instructions to writing and to outline the activities of a particular office there is something wrong with the department staff. Important matters, however, usually are put into writing even though the telephone or personal conference may be used to expedite matters. One reason for this is to make sure the matter is carried through as agreed and also to relieve the mental strain in the manager's office of wondering whether or not a particular item has had proper attention.

The manager should not try to regulate the assignment of work within departments; this is the duty of the heads of operating agencies. He should, however, keep informed of what is going on in each part of the organization and should initiate or participate in the elimination of duplication and unessential operations. The manager should avoid "laying down the law" to department heads; improvements in working methods can best be initiated as a cooperative undertaking in which the operating official receives his due share of the credit.

Suggested Principles. In summary, among the principles to follow in issuing orders are:

1. No order should be issued until it has been determined that the recipient of the order has the authority and the means at his disposal to carry it out without neglecting other duties which have been imposed on him.
2. Every order must be written in the language best calculated to impress it on the minds (and habits!) of the recipients. Usually it is impossible to express an order too simply.
3. The order should define the range of responsibility and the limits of individual discretion.
4. Orders should be positive rather than negative in content and if they contradict previous orders this should be clearly indicated and the reasons given. A great part of administrative work consists of interpretation and reinterpretation of orders in the application to concrete circumstances that were not or could not be taken into account initially.
5. An order should be thought of as a product to be "sold", and full use should be made of modern advertising techniques. An attractive poster with a three word caption often proves more effective than a precisely worded "directive". The language of soap ads may lack legal precision, but it sells soap.
6. The manager must make certain that orders are carried through. A good secretary or clerk can maintain daily follow-up controls by filing matters by date when a reply or completion of the work is expected.

Note: Sample copies of work order forms, inter-departmental correspondence forms, memorandum forms, and forms for transmitting council request or actions to department heads may be secured on loan from MIS.